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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to identify some of the variables affecting the degree to which the single-parent father functions without the aid of a wife. The purpose is to examine some of the variables within the context of role transition theory. Such an examination should be useful in providing the groundwork for both future research and information dissemination. This paper provides a basis for discussion from a brief review of the research literature followed by a review of the role transition theory. In viewing the transition to single parenthood, it is concluded that relatively easy transition is characterized by sufficient anticipatory socialization, low levels of role strain, and goals which may be reasonably easily reached. (Author/LBB)

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SINGLE-PARENT FATHERS: An Application of Role Transition Theory

by Richard M. Smith*

This paper is an attempt to identify some of the variables affecting the degree to which the single-parent father functions without the aid of a wife. It is not within the scope of this paper to examine all of the antecedent variables which influence the outcome of single parenting. Rather, the purpose is to examine some of the variables within the context of role transition theory. Such an examination should be useful in providing the groundwork for both future research and information dissemination. With this in mind, the paper will provide a basis for discussion from a brief review of the research literature followed by a review of role transition theory.

The single-parent family is not a new phenomenon. Undoubtedly, it has existed as long as the human family, and has probably been exposed to greater hardships than the two-parent family. The terminology used to identify the one-parent unit in research literature is variable at best (Sprey, 1967). For example, terms such as "broken homes", "incomplete families", "single-parent families", "sole-parent family", and "one-parent families" are frequently used interchangeably. Yet, in reality each concept denotes a different phenomenon. In an attempt to avoid such discrepancies, the term single-parent families will be used in this paper. This type of family is defined as an on-going unit which consists of one parent and at least one dependent child. With this definition, single parenthood may be conceptualized as both an on-going process as well as a final condition (Sprey, 1967).

Thus, we may view single parenthood as a process which reflects a qualitative change in family living that results from a specific crisis or incident. Such a crisis may produce single-parent families

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which are headed by either a mother or a father, or a surrogate parent. A review of the literature, however, indicates that single parenthood in general has received only sparse research attention. In addition, to date the research has, by and large, focused on the mother as the single-parent family head, with very little research focusing on the father as the single-parent family head (Orthner, Brown and Ferguson, 1976). Finally, some of the research which has been conducted on single parenthood has relied on the responses of secondary sources (Benson, 1968).

The magnitude of single parenthood can only be inferred from statistical data in the form of census and projection records data, rendering unknown, the exact number of single-parent fathers. Estimates from the 1970 U. S. Census indicate that at least ten percent of all single-parent families were headed by a male, while in Canada the 1971 census revealed that 21 percent of single-parent families were headed by a male (Schlesinger, 1975).[1] In 1975 the number of single-parent families headed by males in Great Britain had risen to nearly 17 percent of all single parents. Assuming that these statistics reflect a continuing trend in single parenting, it appears likely that 20 percent of all single-parent families in the U. S. will be headed by a male in 1980. Thus, it is imperative that more research be conducted on single-parent families, and particularly those headed by males.

As we examine the traditional roles of the father in relation to child-rearing, we find that the father's roles have actually been subordinated to an auxiliary status in support of the mother (Parsons and Bales, 1955). In most societies for which there is adequate data, the father is primarily responsible for the instrumental tasks that relate the family to the larger social system, while women specialize in meeting the expressive needs of the family (Zelditch, 1955). The

[1]It should be noted that this figure is calculated on the basis of children up to the age of 24, while the U.S. figures use children up to the age of 18 only.

significance of the father can be seen in his role as the overseer of family integrity, equanimity, social solidarity, and endurance, and it is predicated on the unchallenged assumption that a stable family system is essential to the well-being of the society.

When the father is contributing to the sustained, even functioning of the family unit, which is of fundamental social importance, then he is assuming the role which has the greatest relevance.[2] Only within the family can the individual be observed in terms of the total configuration of his life roles (Goode, 1960).

As we look more closely at the roles of the father within the home, we find that males are encouraged to be more instrumental, while females are encouraged to be expressive. This follows the expectations of society in that boys are disciplined in the pursuit of the more extrinsic rewards of society. The male is expected to achieve a given level of productivity while following socially acceptable standards. He is discouraged from showing emotional involvement in his roles. He is not encouraged to be expressive. He is taught to be highly competitive and stay away from meaningful interpersonal relationships. Such behavior allows little room for kindness, sympathy, or visible emotional bonds (Benson, 1968). Yet, there are times when males are expected to combine expressive and instrumental qualities (Johnson, 1963). The male is called on to play the disimilar roles of provider, husband, and father. The last role requires a combining of instrumentality and expressiveness to a greater extent than the first two roles.

Research indicates that the roles of father are very important in the development and socialization of children (Smith and Walters, 1975; Lynn, 1974; Benson, 1968). We find that even though males have had little training or encouragement to develop expressive or nurturing skills they are expected to provide appropriate behavioral models for their children to emulate. For example, research indicates

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[2]It should be noted that it may be argued that even though Parsons and others believe that the male role, as described here, is of greatest importance socially, there is in reality little empirical evidence to support the idea.

that the father plays an important role in the child's development of sex-role identification (Mussen and Distler, 1959; Biller, 1971), acquisition of social competency (Sears, 1953), development of appropriate moral values (Hoffman, 1971), and the development of personality (Lynn, 1974). In addition, the research indicates that the manner in which the father interacts with his children will influence their self concept (Lynn, 1974), independence (Lynn and Sawrey, 1959), scholastic performance (Christopher, 1967), sex-role orientation (Biller, 1971) and whether or not the child will become delinquent (Smith, 1974).[3]

Keeping in mind the basic socialization process of males, let us now introduce into the family of procreation a crisis that results in the termination of the nuclear family. The crisis may be the death of one of the parents, or it might be divorce, separation, or desertion. In any event, one parent leaves the family, leaving the other parent to carry out the raising of children, as well as providing economically and emotionally for their needs.

The single-parent male is now faced with the task of adjusting his roles to meet the needs of the new situation. This results in role strain. The father must become nurturing, understanding, empathetic, etc., to meet the needs of his children. These functions are basically expressive in nature and as such require that he become less instrumental, at least while he is with his children. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the single-parent father may have had little or no previous socialization in nurturing, child care, of home-making skills. It becomes obvious that role strain of this nature could handicap the single-parent father to the point where be becomes ineffective as a parent.

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[3]It is not within the scope of this paper to make a complete review of the literature on the importance of fathers. The reader is referred to the article entitled, "Fathers of Delinquent Males: A Review of the Literature" in Family Perspective, 1975, Vol. 10, (No. 1):31-37, by Richard M. Smith and James Walters for a more comprehensive review of the literature.

Role Transition Theory

To date no conceptual framework has been postulated to integrate or to give meaning to the research findings on single-parent fathers. Since single parenting involves a major shift in expected role performance, role transition theory provides a framework from which some conceptualizations may be made. Role transition theory deals with the ease or difficulty one experiences in changing from one role to another. The change in roles may come about as a change in social expectations, social involvement or as in the case of single parents, as the result of a change in the marital dyad.

Role transition is the process of entering or leaving a given social role (Cottrell, 1942; Burr, 1973). Variables which relate to role transitions are: (a) ease of role transition, (b) anticipatory socialization, (c) role strain, (d) transition procedures, (e) amount of normative change, and (f) facilitation of goal attainment (Burr, Hill, Nye and Reiss, in press).

Ease of role transition is defined as the degree to which there is both freedom from difficulty and the availability of personal and societal resources to either begin or end a social role (Burr, et al.) This is a continuous variable that ranges from a point where transitions are very difficult, to the opposite extreme where transitions are accomplished with relative ease. Measurement of this variable in the past has been very subjective in nature, and consequently, there are no objective or standardized intervals (Burr, et al.).

Anticipatory socialization is a process of learning role expectations such as norms, values, or attitudes before actually engaging in that role (Burr, et al). Anticipatory socialization is a continuous variable in that the amount of preparation can range from no preparation to a great deal of preparation. This would suggest that an individual who has had some previous exposure to a given role will adjust more easily when required to assume that role. In our case, the

more experience a male has had in child care as he has grown-up, the easier it will be for him to assume the role of single parent. Measurement of this variable has not been standardized (Burr, et al.).

Role strain is the difficulty one experiences in meeting the demands or expectations of a given role (Goode, 1960). Goode (1960: 485) explains that there are several types or sources of role strain. The first is that no role demand is such a spontaneous pleasure that conformity will occur automatically. Second, each individual takes part in a number of different role relationships, and each role requires different, and at times, contradictory obligations. Third, each role relationship will typically demand several responses or activities. Finally, each individual may by virtue of performing one role, be obligated to engage in various role relations with different individuals, that is what Merton (1968) refers to as the role-set. Thus, role strain is also a problem of how, and to what extent one is able to manage his whole role-set (Goode, 1960:485).

Transition procedures are important in that the adjustment to future roles depends on the importance attached to the change by society (Cottrell, 1942). Transition procedures are variable ranging from unimportant and vague to extremely important and very definitive (Burr, et al.).Summarily the more important or definite the transition procedures are for entering or leaving a given role, the easier the transition will be into or out of that role (Burr, et al; Cottrell, 1942).

The amount of normative change as a variable directly related to role transitions was first proposed by Burr (1973:139-140). Normative change deals with both the number of and the social significance of the changes required as one moves into or out of a specific role (Burr, 1973). Normative change is taking place at all times as we adjust our roles to meet social expectations. However, as a role transition occurs, there is an increase in the number of role norms that change for the person who is moving out of one role into another. Thus the greater the normative change

that surrounds a role change the more difficult it becomes for one to move into or out of that role (Burr, et al.).

The last variable which will be dealt with here is that of facilitation of goal attainment. Goal attainment is the extent to which adjustment of role allows the individual to realize ~~their~~ his dominant goals within his subculture (Cottrell, 1942). This variable ranges from preventing goal achievement to being highly facilitating. The more a given role facilitates a person's goal attainment, the easier the transition will be into or out of a role (Burr, et al.). When a given role prevents the attainment of goals, there will be substitute gratifications to lower the influence of goal facilitation on the ease of transition into a given role.

The individual who is faced with making transition from a dyadic relationship to single parent status must cope with a number of changes in his behavior. The number and intensity of these changes will determine how expediently and traumatic the transition will be. Utilizing the previously discussed variables of role transition theory, we have derived the following propositions regarding the intensity and number of changes required for the male to move into the role required of a single parent. There are several different aspects of role transitions that are theoretically important. However, the concern of this paper is with the factors that influence the ease of making these transitions. This dependent variable is defined as the degree to which there is freedom from difficulty and the presence of sufficient resources to make these changes (Burr, 1973:124). These proporsitions will deal only with the changes that are most closely aligned with child-rearing procedures.

Proposition 1. Those males who experience a greater amount of anticipatory socialization will more easily make the transition to the roles of a single parent than will those males who have had little or no anticipatory socialization.

Anticipatory socialization in this case involves having taken care of brothers or sisters, babysitting or child care as an adult, and having read about or taken classes on child-rearing.

Proposition 2. For single-parent fathers, the lower the level of role strain, the easier the transition will be to single parent status.

The role strain in this case is that which results from (a) perceived social expectations (i.e. are the roles of single parenthood clearly defined so that the individual knows what may be expected of him?), (b) perceived family expectations, (c) the logistics of child care, (d) meeting the emotional needs of their children, (e) the child's adjustment to the loss of the mother, (f) becoming single again, e.g. loss of companionship, and (g) coping with loneliness. Each of these areas is a potential source of strain. Any one of these factors may contribute to role strain, which in turn, will influence the transition into the roles attached to single parenthood.

Proposition 3. The more that single-parent fathers perceive that the transition procedures are clearly defined, the easier they will make the transition to single-parent status.

The adjustment to a role depends on the importance that society places on the new role. Cottrell (1942) indicated that ease of transition will vary "directly with the degree of importance attached to and the definiteness of the transitional procedures used by the society in designating the change in" a given role (619). This implies that transition procedures is a continuous variable that ranges from being socially unimportant and unclear to highly important and very definite. Thus, when single-parent fathers perceive that society has clearly defined the procedures for becoming a single parent, they will be able to make the transition more easily (e.g. when a male loses his wife through death, society expects him to continue on as a single parent, at least for a time).

Proposition 4. The greater the intensity and the more pervasive the degree of normative change associated with the transition to single-parent status, the more difficult it will be to make the transition to single parenthood.

Normative change, here, is in terms of (a) discipline of the children (e.g. will the single-parent father have to change his disciplinary approach and techniques?), (b) relationship changes with his children (i.e. degree of closeness), (c) residential changes, (d) occupational changes in order to be with his children or to provide for them, and (e) changes in social life. Thus, the male who experiences more change, and changes that require large behavioral adjustments, is going to have more difficulty in adjusting to the roles of a single parent.

Proposition 5. The more that a male perceives the status of single parenthood to be a deterrent to achieving his goals, the more difficult will be his transition to single parent status.

When an individual's goals (e.g. career, family, or life goals) are threatened or thwarted, and there are no satisfactory substitutes or alternative goals, it will be more difficult for that person to make the transition from one role to another. Resistance would be even greater when the individual sees the new role as being the cause of the goal frustration. The single-parent father who sees being a single parent as a deterrent to successfully achieving his previous goals will have more difficulty in making the transition to single parent status. However, goal facilitation will be conducive to making the role transition when the previous goals can be adapted to meet (a) the individual's personal needs, (b) his children's needs, and society's expectations. The single-parent father who sees being a single parent as a means of successfully achieving his previous goals will have less difficulty in making the transition to single parent status (e.g. if the father had a goal of close family interaction, he would see working with his children more closely as aiding in the achievement of that goal).

To test these propositions, a pilot study was conducted in which 27 single-parent fathers were interviewed. The background characteristics of the subjects indicated that they were primarily white (25) and middle class. The primary source of single parenthood was divorce (23), with four being widowers. The length of marriage varied from one year to twenty-five years, and the majority of the sample (20) had been single for one year or less.

Anticipatory Socialization and Ease of Role Transitions

The results indicated that for the variable of anticipatory socialization the majority of the subjects (55.6 percent) had very little experience in child care during their youth. During their marriage, over 70 (70.4) percent had been involved in caring for their own children and over 85 (85.1) percent were involved in disciplining their children. Nearly 60 percent (59.2) of the men reported that they had performed only traditionally masculine tasks as youth (i.e. lawn care, taking out the garbage, etc.). During their marriage, only 55.5 percent of the men had participated in housework. Two-thirds of the fathers (66.7 percent) had not participated in any child-rearing or family life education classes nor had they read books or articles on child-rearing or parenting prior to becoming a single parent.

A Pearson product-moment coefficient of correlation was used to test the relationship between the fathers' perceived ease of role transition and their perception of anticipatory socialization. The association between the two variables showed that anticipatory socialization was not correlated with ease of role transitions (see Table 1).

A step-wise multiple regression analysis was used to determine the influence that anticipatory socialization might have on the perceived ease of role transition. The influence of anticipatory socialization on ease of role transition indicated that the subjects perceived that anticipatory socialization did influence the ease of role

transition beyond the .05 level. This finding would tend to support Burr's (1973) assumption that anticipatory socialization and ease of role transition is a curvilinear relationship in which low amounts of anticipatory socialization are as beneficial as moderate or high amounts to ease of role transition. Thus, even low amounts of anticipatory socialization (i.e. child-rearing experience in the form of education or actual experience) would ease the transition to single parenthood.

Role Strain and Ease of Role Transitions

The area of greatest reported role strain was the subjects concern for their performance as single parents, as dictated by their perceptions of social expectations and role performance levels. They perceived that they were being socially pressured to prove that they could rear their children alone.

Another variable that influenced role strain was the ease with which the children adjusted to the absence of their mother. When the child adjusted easily to the mother's absence, it helped to reduce the father's role strain. Thirty-seven (10) percent of the fathers reported that their children's adjustment had helped to ease their own adjustment and strain. When the children experienced a difficult adjustment to the loss of their mother, the father reported (40.7 percent) he experienced a more difficult adjustment.

The fathers (83.2 percent) reported that they could handle the logistics of child care (i.e. supervision, housework, etc.) adequately. Some experienced scheduling problems. When the fathers were asked if they felt capable of caring for the emotional needs of their children, six of the fathers (22.2 percent) reported trouble in filling their children's emotional needs. The remaining fathers (77.8 percent) indicated some concern in meeting the emotional needs of their children but believed that they could handle most problems.[4]

[4]This finding is contrary to Mendes' (1976). She reported that within her study this area of parenting was perceived as being the most difficult for the single-parent father.

The fathers reported that the greatest strain that they experienced in becoming a single parent was being single again. These men indicated that the loss of their wife's companionship was the most difficult adjustment they had in becoming a single parent. The majority of the fathers found that loneliness was the greatest problem they had to cope with in becoming a single parent. Nearly all of the fathers believed that having their children with them helped them to cope with loneliness.

A Pearson product-moment coefficient of correlation was computed to test the relationship between the fathers' perceived ease of role transition and their perception of role strain. The coefficient of correlation for role strain and ease of role transition was (-.47) which is significant at the .02 level (See Table 1). The greater the role strain, the more difficult the transition to single parenthood.

A step-wise multiple regression analysis was used to determine the influence that role strain might have on the perceived ease of role transition. The findings indicated that role strain was found to influence the perceived ease of role transition at the .01 level of significance. The greater the role strain, the more difficult the transition to a new role. Analysis of the remaining variables indicated that role strain was the most variable which influenced ease of role transition the most. This finding would suggest that there is a linear relationship between role strain and ease of role transition.[5]

Perception of Transition Procedures and Ease of Role Transitions

The majority of the fathers (51.9 percent) indicated that they perceived that the procedures for moving into single parenthood were clearly delinated by society. Only 14 (14.8) percent of the subjects

[5]This inference is based on the reported perceptions of a non-random sample of single-parent fathers. The sample size was small and no controls for conventionality were utilized. Thus, the inference is made with caution.

indicated that they did not see the transition procedures as clear.[6]

A Pearson product-moment correlation was computed for transition procedures, as perceived by the fathers, and perceived ease of role transition. The association was not found to be significant. The step-wise multiple regression analysis found no significant differences between the subjects' perceived ease of role transition and transition procedures. Since this variable reflected neither support for nor rejection of Cottrell's (1942:619) assumptions, it may be that the varialbe is not important in role transitions.

Perceived Amount of Normative Change and Perceived Ease of Role Transitions

The fathers in this study reported that a good deal of change took place in their lives. Some of the changes that were reported would ease role transitions (e.g. the fathers who reported that they had made a change in discipline perceived that it had been toward a more lax style). Nearly half of the fathers (48.1 percent) reported that their relationship with their children had become much closer than it was before single parenthood. The subjects perceived that the greatest change that took place was in their interpersonal relationships and social life. The majority (77.8 percent) of the fathers reported that they no longer associated with married couples to any extent. These fathers reported that they found more enjoyment in associating with other singles.

A Pearson product-moment coefficient of correlation was computed to determine the association between perceived normative change and perceived ease of role transition. The association was not significant. A step-wise multiple regression analysis found no significant difference between the subjects' perceived ease of role transition and perceived amount of normative change. One possible explanation for the low influence of normative change on ease of role transition might be that neither the

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[6]The question used to obtain the subjects' perceptions of this variable may not have been adequate to accurately assess it.

TABLE 1. PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS FOR ALL INDEPENDENT VARIABLES AND THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE

	EASE OF ROLE TRANSITION	NORMATIVE CHANGE	TRANSITION PROCEDURES	GOAL FACILITA-TION	ROLE STRAIN
ANTICIPATORY SOCIALIZATION	.28	.19	.06	-.03	.19
ROLE STRAIN	-.47*	-.08	-.21	-.47*	
GOAL FACILITATION	.39**	.16	.25		
TRANSITION PROCEDURES	.25	-.01			
NORMATIVE CHANGE	.05				

* $p < .02$

** $p < .05$

magnitude of nor the quality of normative change was measured. Perhaps with an accurate measure of magnitude and quality of change, a significant difference would appear.

Perceived Goal Facilitation and Perceived Ease of Role Transitions

Nearly half (40.7 percent) of the fathers perceived that single parenthood did not inhibit their personal goals or the goals they had for their children. A few of the fathers (18.5 percent) believed that the children would be able to reach their goals more easily if their mothers were present. Only two of the fathers (7.4 percent) reported that they were actively seeking a spouse to aid in the child-rearing.[7] One-third of the fathers viewed single parenthood as an aid in obtaining their goals because the marriage had been much more disruptive of their lives and goals than were the difficulties of single parenthood. Other fathers reported that they were financially better off and were able to pursue goals that had been previously dropped because of marriage. The general tenor of the respondents was that single parenthood was not a hindrance to the pursuit or fulfillment of their goals.

The Pearson product-moment coefficient of correlation for goal facilitation and ease of role transition was (.39) significant at the .05 level. This finding indicates that when perceived goal facilitation is high it will contribute significantly to, the dependent variable, ease of role transition. A further correlation was computed to find possible relations between the independent variables. A correlation of -.47 ($p < .02$) was found for the variables of role strain and goal facilitation. This would indicate these two variables are components of the same concept. The inference here is that a high level of role strain would be accompanied by a lower perception of goal facilitation resulting in a more difficult role transition. Conversely, a low level of role strain would be accompanied by a higher perception of goal facilitation which would result in an easing of the role transition. The stepwise multiple regression analysis found no significant difference between

[7]The fathers that indicated that they were actively seeking a spouse were rearing young female children. These fathers reported that they believed that it was important to have a female present in the home to help raise the daughters.

the subjects' perceived ease of role transition and goal facilitation.

Perceived Ease of Role Transition

Nearly 40 (37.0) percent of the fathers believed that they were prepared for single parenthood. Yet, more than one-third (37.0 percent) reported that the transition to single parenthood had been difficult. This suggested that the items used to measure the variable ease of role transition were in fact measuring two different aspects of role transition. There was also the possibility that the subjects were responding in a highly conventional manner.[8]

A Pearson product-moment coefficient of correlation analysis revealed that those fathers who had been single for a shorter time reported an easier role transition ($p < .05$). A multiple regression analysis was computed on the items used to make up the variables of ease of role transition. The results indicated that each item may have been assessing unrelated concepts. However, a Chi-square analysis failed to demonstrate any significant differences. It was concluded that the items used to assess ease of role transitions were valid. This would suggest that the fathers who had been single for the shortest time were responding either in a conventional manner or they were unwilling to admit even to themselves that the transition was difficult.

In conclusion, it appears that role transition theory does provide a basis from which predictions may be made about single-parent fathers adjustment to single parenthood. Based on the results of the pilot study, propositions 1, 2, and 5 were supported by the evidence. This means that the independent variables of anticipatory socialization, role strain, and goal facilitation were most useful in predicting ease of role transition. The independent variables of normative change and transition procedures were not useful in predicting ease of role transition.

In viewing the transition to single parenthood, these conclusions

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[8]The interview schedule did not have a conventionality scale built in.

may be made. A successful and relatively easy transition to single parenthood is characterized by sufficient anticipatory socialization, low levels of role strain, and goals which may be reasonably easily reached. This would indicate that those fathers who have: (a) actively gained experience in child-rearing, (b) received some eudcation about children, (c) participated in household responsibilities, (d) been actively involved in the discipline of their children, and (e) had nurturing supportive interaction with their children, will find it easier to make the transition to single parenthood. Ease of role transition for single-parent fathers will be enhanced by: (a) confidence in that one may succeed in the role of single parent, (b) not having to prove that one is a successful parent, and (c) having the knowledge and resources necessary for the care of both their own emotional needs and those of their children.

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